

Floral Street Elementary School

57 Floral Street, Shrewsbury, MA 01545

(508) 841-8720 Fax: (508) 841-8721

www.ci.shrewsbury.ma.us/Sps/Schools/Floral

Joseph M. Sawyer
Principal

Jane O. Lizotte
Assistant Principal



INFORMATION ON THE DECEMBER HOLIDAY SEASON

December 9, 2002

Dear Parents & Caretakers,

Recently, I have received some questions from parents regarding our school's policy on religious holidays. This is a tricky issue that public schools grapple with constantly, and because of many gray areas it is one that deserves careful consideration.

Because of the First Amendment's requirement of the separation of church and state, public schools are not allowed to promote or celebrate a particular religion. However, it is appropriate and necessary that schools teach about religion, as no study of history, culture, or current events could be done without such consideration. At the elementary school level, educators have to be particularly careful because of the level of the students' sophistication and understanding. Our children are impressionable, and we do not want them to perceive that a teacher or the school is promoting one religion or making those whose beliefs are in the minority feel excluded. We do, however, want our children to gain an understanding of their fellow students' cultures. This naturally comes to the forefront during the December holiday season.

Some parents have questioned why their child may have done an activity on Hanukkah or Kwanzaa but not Christmas. My sense, from talking with teachers, is that the intent in such cases is to expose our students to holiday traditions with which they might otherwise be unfamiliar. I also believe that some of our teachers who come from a Christian background are very sensitive about being perceived as somehow promoting their own religion, given that it is the prevalent faith in our community. I have discussed this issue at a recent staff meeting in order to clarify that teachers need not worry about this, as long as they maintain an appropriate neutral approach with their students. As our school population becomes more diverse, it is also important that students from other cultures understand Christmas traditions, so it is appropriate for teachers to explore these as well.

Naturally, no one wants to offend anyone else's religious beliefs, and it is often a fine line between celebrating culture and expressing a religious point of view. While we will continue to be sensitive to individual families whose religious

beliefs regarding holiday celebrations are very strict (such as Jehovah's Witnesses), I believe that it is appropriate to acknowledge and to inform our students about the holidays that the families in our school community celebrate. Our students might read or listen to excellent literature such as *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss, or *A Visit from St. Nicholas* by Clement Moore, as well as a book such as *The Trees of the Dancing Goats* by Patricia Polacco, which is a story about Hanukkah and Christmas. When discussing such literature, the teacher should explain the origin of these holidays to students, as appropriate given their age. It is also fitting for our students have similar learning experiences about other winter holidays such as the Buddhist holiday of Bodhi Day, the Hindu holiday of Diwali, the African-American cultural holiday of Kwanzaa, and the Muslim holiday of Ramadan. The context of how this is done is key, as the school must be careful not to send a message to students that one or more religions are preferred, or that the school is hostile to any religion or to non-believers. A document from the Anti-Defamation League titled *The 'December Dilemma'* is informative regarding legal precedent, etc. and may be found at www.adl.org

Just this past Friday, one of our second grade classes feasted on Hanukkah latkes (potato pancakes) provided by a Jewish classmate and shared sweetened corn bread with a Muslim classmate on the occasion of Eid-al-Fitr (the Ramadan Feast of Fast Breaking). A display in our hallways shows another second grade class's projects where students describe their families' holiday traditions. Next week, our students will have holiday parties where they might eat Christmas cookies off of Santa Claus plates, and they will be invited to sing a variety of holiday songs during our All School Meeting (including Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, which seems to be the favorite!). The goal of these diverse activities is not to celebrate a particular holiday, but to celebrate our children and to help them to recognize, honor, and enjoy the differences among us.

As with any complicated topic, there are a variety of opinions among the members of our school community regarding how our students should experience holidays at school. I believe it is important that, within legal guidelines, our teachers have flexibility regarding how to focus on this topic. Because of this, as with many things, experiences will vary from class to class. If you do not wish your child to participate in a particular activity because of your religious beliefs, please do contact your child's teacher or me. I hope this letter clarifies the issue for you, and, as always, I welcome any feedback, questions, or concerns that you have.

On behalf of the school, I hope you continue to enjoy this holiday season and that you have a peaceful and prosperous New Year.

Respectfully,

Joseph M. Sawyer

